

## Starlit Path 99

### Chapter 99: A Capital in Chaos and a Father's Hope

In the Purple Gold Palace of the capital, memorials piled high on the desk, but Emperor Yuwen Xiu didn't spare them a glance. He knew their contents—denunciations of Grand Preceptor Kong Xiu, General Jiang Li, and the Young Lord of Beiluo. The carved wooden doors creaked open, breaking the palace's eerie silence as the old eunuch hurried in, his whisk flicking anxiously.

Yuwen Xiu, seated on the dragon throne, glanced at him and raised a finger to his lips. "Don't startle my black dragon." The old eunuch froze, then tiptoed forward cautiously.

"Have you found who stole my nine imperial edicts?" Yuwen Xiu asked, his voice icy with barely restrained fury. Though young, he prided himself on his patience, but this betrayal had crossed a line.

The eunuch knelt, taking a deep breath. "It was Minister He Shou. He bribed a junior eunuch cleaning the study to steal them."

Yuwen Xiu's hand stroked the black serpent as he squinted. "And the junior eunuch?"

"He's been detained in the dungeon, awaiting Your Majesty's judgment," the eunuch replied, pained. As head of the eunuchs, he felt responsible for the lapse.

"Where are the nine edicts now?" Yuwen Xiu pressed.

The eunuch trembled, hesitating before answering. “He Shou colluded with other ministers. Last night, they sent all nine edicts to Yuan Chi City, summoning Jiang Li to the capital.”

Yuwen Xiu’s low laugh echoed, tinged with sorrow. Then, his voice turned cold. “Behead the thieving eunuch and send his head to He Shou’s mansion.”

The kneeling eunuch shuddered but bowed in acknowledgment.

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In the capital’s Prime Minister’s Mansion, a gathering of Great Zhou’s ministers—none from Kong Xiu’s faction—filled the halls. The Prime Minister’s residence, long overshadowed by the emperor’s trust in the Grand Preceptor, had faded into obscurity. The world knew Kong Xiu, but few spoke of the Prime Minister. Drawn from the capital’s noble families, the office had been weakened by emperors seeking to curb aristocratic power in favor of the Grand Preceptor.

The mansion buzzed with activity. Prime Minister Zhao Kuo, a gaunt, scholarly old man, sat at the head of the hall, his sharp eyes gleaming. Under Emperor Yuwen Tuo, he’d languished in obscurity. When Yuwen Tuo died, he thought his moment had come, only for Kong Xiu to seize power and suppress him further. Now, with Kong Xiu embroiled in scandal, Zhao Kuo saw his chance to reclaim prominence. The young emperor, without Kong Xiu’s guidance, was a mere boy, easily manipulated by seasoned nobles.

“Lu Ping’an dares to challenge us but sends only a coachman and a maid to the capital? He underestimates us!” one minister scoffed.

“We must be cautious. Beiluo’s Young Lord is unpredictable,” another warned. “He uprooted Beiluo’s entrenched noble families with ruthless means. We cannot take him lightly.”

The ministers debated heatedly. Zhao Kuo, though frail, radiated authority. “What’s the progress, Lord He?” he asked, turning to He Shou.

He Shou set down his teacup, smiling confidently. “Prime Minister, all is arranged. The emperor issued nine edicts. Jiang Li might defy one, but not nine—even Bai Fengtian couldn’t resist such a command in his day.”

“As for Lu Ping’an’s maid and coachman entering the capital, they’re no threat. Beiluo is his domain, but this is the capital. The fate of Beiluo’s nobles won’t repeat here, especially with mere servants sent. What can a lowly maid and coachman do to us, the court’s pillars?”

Zhao Kuo clapped, laughing. The ministers murmured in agreement. “We must remain vigilant,” Zhao Kuo cautioned. “With the Northern County army eyeing Yuan Chi City, we cannot afford to be reckless and become ministers of a fallen state.”

The ministers nodded, but He Shou waved dismissively. “Prime Minister, you worry too much. Tantai Xuan’s forces hold Yuan Chi but have retreated a hundred thirty miles. Why? Because the rebel Overlord’s Western County army approaches. When two tigers clash, one must fall. Tantai Xuan won’t risk attacking the capital now, lest the Overlord outmaneuvers him. He can’t afford defeat.”

He Shou’s eyes gleamed as he analyzed the situation. “Our concern is Lu Ping’an’s five hundred cavalry entering the capital. This demon dares send men to judge us? Who is he, without even a proper title, just Lu Changkong’s son, to act so brazenly? With the forces the Prime Minister has secretly amassed, we’ll kill his maid and coachman, shattering his arrogance and showing our young emperor that Lu Ping’an is no ally—only we are.”

The ministers hesitated, exchanging glances. Zhao Kuo's eyes flickered, then he clapped slowly, prompting the others to join in. He Shou's lips curled, basking in the approval. After a lifetime of obscurity, he was destined for eternal fame.

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In Yuan Chi City's Great Zhou army camp, chaos erupted as messengers galloped in. Jiang Li, clad in silver armor, stepped from his tent to find six envoys waiting. The emperor had issued six edicts. As dawn's first light painted the sky, three more arrived, bringing the total to nine.

Jiang Li's mind flashed to a memory: a desert sunset, its crimson glow bathing the sands. Young and idealistic, he stood beside the man he admired most, Bai Fengtian, who sighed at the endless dunes. Under nine imperial edicts, Bai Fengtian had abandoned quelling the Western Rong, ordering the live burial of three hundred thousand Rong—not just soldiers, but civilians. Jiang Li recalled his words: "The Western Rong, Eastern Yi, Southern Barbarians, Ghost Fang, and Peacock Kingdom will one day plague Great Zhou. If they invade, the people will suffer, and the land will burn. Unable to subdue them in my lifetime, I can only weaken one with this heartless act."

Bai Fengtian's helplessness under those edicts mirrored Jiang Li's now—a bitter cycle. He had verified each edict, bearing the emperor's handwriting and seal. Nine edicts showed Yuwen Xiu's resolve. Facing the dawn's red glow, Jiang Li saw the Northern County army massed outside Yuan Chi. He removed his armor, knelt, and accepted the edicts.

Before departing, he turned to Chi Lian. "Take Qingniao from Zuolong City."

Chi Lian blinked. "Where to?"

Jiang Li gazed toward Zuolong, picturing the girl bustling in the kitchen, brewing chicken soup. Reluctance flickered in his eyes. "To Beiluo, to the Young Lord. It's the safest place in the world. I only wish for her to be safe and sound."

He left, riding with the nine envoys toward the capital, leaving behind soldiers in ill-fitting armor, their eyes filled with reluctance.

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Five hundred Beiluo cavalry, led by Luo Cheng, thundered through the sunlight. Nie Changqing sat on the carriage's frame, his butcher's knife resting quietly. Inside, Ning Zhao and Yi Yue sat cross-legged, eyes closed, cultivating their immortal techniques.

The capital's gates stood wide open. Guards and sentries on the walls watched the approaching cavalry and carriage with strange expressions. No one greeted them. As the cavalry passed through, the gates slammed shut, wooden bolts dropping into place. Luo Cheng, on horseback, scanned the surroundings, his gaze sharpening. The capital's bustling streets were eerily empty, like a dead city, with a faint killing intent lingering in the air.

The carriage halted, horses whinnying uneasily. "Commander Luo, be cautious," Ning Zhao's voice called from within. Luo Cheng drew his sword, and the five hundred cavalry followed suit.

Nie Changqing opened his eyes, a sneer curling his lips.

At the capital's finest establishment, Wangxiang Tower, a feast was laid out. He Shou, in plain robes, sat with several ministers, laughing and chatting. A soldier entered, whispering to him. He Shou smiled, turning to the others. "Gentlemen, the show begins. Join me to watch."

They rose, standing at the balcony, hands clasped behind them, overlooking the capital's main street. From the city walls, the twang of bowstrings erupted. Thousands of arrows rained down like a deadly mist, enveloping the Beiluo cavalry.